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## BIRDS OF NEW GUINEA.

BY GEO. S. MEAD.

(Continued from Vol. XXVIII, p. 920 )

The Magnificent bird of paradise—*Diphyllodes magnifica* or *speciosa*, is as appropriately named as any of the *Paradisea*, since the qualifying adjectives are scarcely more than mere epithets, with nothing specially descriptive or distinctive about them. In the Magnificent we find an adornment not unlike that which beautifies the Superb, viz. a mantle or fringe of bright yellow feathers over an inch long, rising from the back of the neck. The bird is still further characterized by the long filaments noted in the Red and other members of the family. These feathers in the Magnificent curve into a double circle, differing, therefore, in shape from those of his cousins. A darker yellow than the mantle appears on the body above; this colour of course lights up or deepens with the play of light upon it, just as does also “the rich green flushed with purple” of the parts underneath, so that when the full, expanded plumage is displayed, the radiant little creature will be seen to possess every claim to his title. The under or secondary mantle, whence the generic name, rich and warm in color, sets off still more the novel charms of the bird. In size he is one of the smallest of his race, being but little larger than the King.

Another bird of paradise is not inaptly called the Incomparable, for it is wondrously attired, yet this designation too might as fittingly be bestowed upon almost any species where each is conspicuous for some particular charm. But in one respect at least this paragon (*Paradisea gularis*) presents a decided contrast to other genera—in the structure or appearance of the tail. In place of long floating plumes or bewildering maze of drooping feathers with the wire filaments projecting far beyond, there are true tail-feathers much prolonged and broadening somewhat toward the extremities. As a further mark of distinction in addition to the disproportionately long and peculiarly shaped tail, the Incomparable bears on its head a double crest of velvety feathers which flash and glitter, requiring only the light to bring out all the colours from their dull depths. The same may be said of the scales of copper and gold on the throat and breast. Equally gorgeous though without the scintillating reflections is the glossy apparel of the body and tail. The whole plumage in fact “glows with an effulgence of varied hues that almost baffle description.”

To support this wealth of colour and feathers nature has furnished a pair of strong, substantial legs, very serviceable indeed for grasping branches of trees, but far from shapely. Large, ugly feet and legs, however, are the common heritage of all the birds of paradise, the only parts visible where the useful has predominated over the ornamental. This is eminently true of *Paradisea apoda* whose descriptive, scientific appellation is decidedly a misnomer. Let us not, however, now that we are convinced that *Apoda* has legs, cast the term aside, for the pretty fiction it commemorates is worth retaining. This lovely bird is almost too well known to require more than a brief notice. It was the first of its kind to become a familiar and admired object in museums as it had long been an article of commerce. This fact may have arisen partly from its abundance, its supreme beauty or the accessibility of the regions it inhabited. The specimens we see in cabinets, well mounted as they often are and carefully preserved, are dim and lustreless beside the living creatures as they flash in all the

splendor of vivid colours amid their native haunts. Here the foliaceous snow-white plumes waving in the wind, the buoyant pinions dark of hue, the brown-golden plush of the body, the violet and purple breast, the dazzling yellow of neck and head, the changing metallic green of the throat all form a picture that once seen is never forgotten. Of reduced size and of somewhat paler colors, but in other respects almost the counterpart of the *Apoda*—or Great, Common, Emerald, as it is variously called, is the Lesser bird of paradise—*Paradisea minor* or *papua*. These two species stand in about the same relation to each another as the hairy and downy woodpeckers of our forests.

In his first visit to New Guinea in 1871, D'Albertis killed the male of a bird which is labelled in his interesting work "new genus and new species." Mr. Selater denominated it *Drepanornis albertisii*. It certainly is very different in appearance, especially in the form of the beak, as D'Albertis points out, from other species of birds of paradise. "The beak resembles that of the hoopœ," being long and curved. The plumage lacks the velvet-like texture of other species, but is downy, while the head, although crested with curious protuberances of small feathers gleaming green and copper in certain lights, is not similar in shape. Nor can it be placed on an equality with its fellows in that beauty and arrangement of plumage we think of as typical of birds of paradise. And yet its claims are not to be slighted; its rich umber coat shines with lustre; tufts of feathers, beautifully tinted and so long as to almost enfold the body, spring from the breast and sides, and the dividing colors seem to stand out, so vivid and distinct are they. Whether open or shut the two semicircular feather-fans or shoulder-crests gleam in the light like a humming-bird's array; the same may be said of the throat and breast. Purple, violet, yellow, brown and gold, are some of the hues that chase each another over the soft plumage. The under parts from the breast to the rounded tail which is unadorned with loose plumes or elongations, are white; a roseate tinge may be seen on the spurious wings, while greyish and olive reflections appear on the edgings of both the long and short feathers. The

long, curving bill continued from a small somewhat flattened head, suggest habits akin to the sun or honey birds, and even relationship to them. The above is also called *Epimachus velii*, vide p. 393, Vol. 28, no. 329 of Amer. Nat.

Mr. Denton, whose keenness of observation is evident in his interesting volume of personal experience as it is also in his recollection, and whose ready assistance one takes pleasure in acknowledging, likens the head of *Drepanornis* when the feathers are puffed out to that of the crested grebe. He regards it as one of the oddest, strangest and most grotesque-looking of birds.

Whether the so-called Plume birds form a distinct family as some naturalists have divided them or whether they should be ranked among the birds of paradise as merely a long billed variation—a species to which the *Drepanornis* should properly belong, certain it is that there is nothing lovelier in feathers to entitle their possessors to a classification with the peerless *Paradisæa*. This much as to their appearance; as to their diet, they are both insectivorous and frugivorous feeding largely upon the fruit of the pandanus tree. The legs and feet are almost misshapen, naked along the thighs and livid in colour. The cry is long and cadenced. In essaying a description of these birds it is well to keep in mind the words Mr. Wood used in his own account. In speaking of the inadequacy of language to convey the impression the changing beauty of the plumage leaves upon the mind, he adds: “even with the assistance of colour, any idea that can be given, would necessarily be very imperfect, and the most admirable illustrations ever drawn, rich in ultramarine, carmine, and gold, would ‘pale their ineffectual fires’ even before the stiff and distorted form of the stuffed bird. The very respiration keeps the feathers in continued motion, causing them to change their tints with every breath, etc. This is in itself a description. In additional respects the species under consideration—the twelve-wired *Epimachus*, *Seleucides alba* of D’Albertis, is enshrouded in soft, loose plumage, like velvet to look upon and of the richest tone. It is a beautiful puzzle in arrangement and coloring, a poem in feathers, a symphony in the interfu-

sion of a few tints only, which might almost be reduced to mere lustrous black and orange: the body being dark of hue, while beyond and enveloping the short tail, delicate creamy-yellow plumes extend in a bewildering maze. "The bird is so gorgeous," exclaims D'Albertis, "that it is not surpassed by any other of the feathered tribe." Its distinguishing feature, unique among birds, is the display of wire feathers—six on a side, threading the intricacy of the waving plumes and prolonged several inches. These are much attenuated, black in colour and without the terminal web. They cannot be said to add materially to the beauty of the bird though they certainly do to its singular appearance. Far more attractive from an aesthetic point of view, are the recurved feathers standing out from and partly encircling the neck. These reflect from their burnished surface all flashing colours, blazing in sunlight like polished gems. D'Albertis observed that the tail of the female and young males was long in proportion to the body. There is, however, one of this interesting group of birds, the adult male of which is furnished with a tail remarkable for its excessive length; this is the *Superb epimachus*—*Epimachus magnus* or Long-tailed bird of paradise. Mr. Denton in his *Incidents of a Collector's Rambles* thus summarizes its charms:—"The plumage is a velvety-purple-black; the tail is two feet long; and the side plumes have a bar of the most exquisite green and gold, extending across the tips." In this example the coloration is even simpler than in the foregoing, that is, the ground or primitive tint is black, lustrous black, but the effect of light upon this basal colour is quite as marvellous as in any bird specimen. The play becomes always different and incessant. The black seems both suffused and shot over with emerald, turquoise, bronze, yellow, every hue you please, and this not only from the metallic surface of the wings and tail but from the soft, dark velvet of the body, as well. There is a similar collar or ruff around the neck of the Superb, as adorns the twelve-wired bird; but the tail is altogether different. Instead of the pendulous plumes which may answer for caudal ornamentation we find twelve long-extended quill feathers, the two longest in the middle, sometimes cross-

ing each other at their extremities, the lateral feathers decreasing gradually in length towards the rump. These glow with colour of a brilliancy almost equalling that reflected from the shining throat and breast. Altogether this Plume bird is a splendid representative of its race, not only in respect to its exquisite shape and coloring, but also great size, for it can boast of a total length of nearly four feet. When the mantle is uplifted, there is plainly discernible a lovely wavering crescent of blue light about an inch from the edges and reaching as far as the body. Mr. Wallace describes these broad side-plumes as dilated at their extremities; rather do they seem as if a pair of shears had clipped them before they had become fringed. Nor can it be said that the bar of quivering color extends along the tips; this must be removed as has been stated, a little space below, where, if so chameleon-like a tint can be labelled, it is a glowing azure.

When Mr. John Gould, the author of *Birds of Australia* and other monumental works, was at work in the Island-continent, he limited the range of the Rifle Birds to one small section of that country. Recent travellers, however, in New Guinea have found members of this interesting group there also. Mr. Octavius Stone who spent "a Few Months in New Guinea" collected the *Ptilorhis magnifica* along the southern coast, and Mr. S. F. Denton gives an engaging description of his pursuit and capture of the same. This bird is not enriched with the feathered efflorescence, if we may so term it, to the same extent as the Plume-birds to which it is allied, and the birds of paradise, but the sheen of its scale-plumage is of even greater intensity. Colours flash from head and throat with gem-like rapidity and effulgence, for these parts are covered, as it were, with bits of glittering steel that are emerald-green to look upon when the bird is perfectly still, but when a movement is made there is a sudden blaze of yellow mingled with the primal tints.

The rest of the body is of a velvety black "touched here and there with purple gleams of light." Mr. Denton calls it "one of the loveliest and richest creatures" in the world. Its note he says, is a loud and coarse croak and when it flies "every stroke of its wings squeak as if two pieces of crisp silk had been

rubbed together." The point of resemblance between the *Philoris* and *Epimachus* is the long, curved beak. In other respects there is a marked contrast. The plumage in the former is mainly compact, and, divested of its glancing hues, is characterized by its simplicity. The tail too is not developed into a long or spreading train but is short, stout and square, serving apparently the useful purpose of a prop or assistance to the bird as it climbs on branches of trees, for its likeness to the Creepers has already been pointed out, though its large size as-sorts oddly with their slender frames. It is, however, not entirely without side plumes, but these are thin and scant and reach underneath scarcely beyond the tail when the wings are closed. The croak of this bird is absolutely appalling in its loudness, volume and dissonance; it may be heard half a mile or more and when once heard is never forgotten. He is strangely local in his habitat and whatever spot he has appropriated as his peculiar domain, he cannot be driven away from, nor does he endure a trespasser upon it.

There are several more species of the *Paradisea* or kindred forms yet to be described, but further consideration of them will be deferred to another occasion. Probably others are still to be discovered, and it may be, as has been asserted, that as many as forty distinct varieties of these unrivalled creatures await the admiration and wonder invariably paid them. But on the subject of the irrelevancy of man to the animate beauties of nature, some reflections of Mr. Wallace, in connection with his first sight of the King-bird of paradise, may profitably be studied.

It is needless to say that the foregoing descriptions refer in every instance to the male bird. The female, as is invariably the rule with brilliantly plumaged birds, is comparatively plain, positively so in the case of the Rifle-bird where the dull-est shade of brown emitting no sparkle whatever is all that nature has allotted. She is not even graced with the two bright-green middle tail feathers which shine so conspicuously amid the dark-toned velvet of the male bird. Yet there are some examples of elegance of form and loveliness of plumage that, whether their possessors are merely paler reflections of their



mates or may be gauged on their own merits, can claim high rank in the lists of beauty. Such are, to mention two or three only, the Great and Lesser birds of paradise. It is only in the dazzling presence of their lords that the charms of the females seem dim and unimportant.

But little that is exact and trustworthy is known of the habits, modification and general life of birds of paradise. They keep to the tallest trees as a rule, with the exception of the little King-bird and the Magnificent, who favor bushes and small growths. Although not particularly suspicious they resent intrusion on their haunts, retiring out of sight quickly or screaming in vociferous tones their uneasiness. They do not, however, by any means reserve their discordant cries for occasions of alarm, but are indefatigable in uttering them at other times as well, yet a singularly sweet note heard now and then in the dense forest is accredited to one or another of the paradise-birds. From the Magnificent for instance proceeds a squirrel-like chatter that may be imitated by sucking the back of the hand rapidly. *Raggiana* too is said to make a peculiar whistle as when a man calls his dog.

At periods of mating these birds are noisy and clamorous. It is then that the natives undertake their capture at the time when those remarkable courting-dances or displays are in progress, wherein the male, oblivious to everything but the object of his desire, is thrown into a frenzy of passion, attitudinizes in every conceivable posture and spreads out all the glories of his splendid plumage. The silent deadly blow-gun is now brought into requisition with telling effect, bird after bird falling in the interests of trade. As the *Paradisea* are by no means solitary, but, where they are met with at all, fond of associating together in small flocks, it can easily be perceived how large a supply is annually furnished to the exigencies of commerce. But this murder of the innocents, one may be glad to remember, is after all limited to a few species, for, as it has already been intimated, the majority of the different varieties are never exported—natural obstacles, scarcity of numbers or lack of demand effectually preventing.

The fruits of the teak-wood, the pandanus, etc., constitute perhaps the larger portion of the food of these birds, but their grosser appetite does not disdain an insect diet---beetles, certain kinds of bugs and locusts, not forgetting frogs, lizards and other small reptiles with which the New Guinea forests are well stocked. If one would prefer that these ethereal creatures lived upon things less obnoxious to our tastes, he may console himself with the knowledge that they occasionally partake of butterflies, which in these wilds are, in many cases, almost as lovely and aerial as the birds themselves. It is doubtful, however, if these are taken on the wing as some have fancied; the expanding plumage would seem to forbid any such attempt on the part of the pursuer even though the prey be only a slow-sailing *Lepidopter*. *Seleucides alba* is said to sip the nectar from flowers.

Of the nests, eggs and young but little is yet known although it would seem as if opportunities for such knowledge, had not been altogether lacking.

“What character,  
O sovereign Nature! I appeal to thee,  
Of all thy feathered progeny  
Is so unearthly, and what shape so fair?  
So richly decked in variegated down,  
Green, sable, shining yellow, shadowy brown,  
Tints softly with each other blended,  
Hues doubtfully begun and ended;  
Or intershooting, and to sight  
Lost and recovered, as the rays of light  
Glance on the conscious plumes touched here and there”?  
Bird of Paradise.

—Wordsworth.

A colored plate of the *Drepanornis albertisii* will appear in the next number of the Naturalist.



DREPANORNIS ALBERTISII  
"From D'albertis"